

## January 11, 2010 - Seeking A New Pattern For Troops In Afghanistan

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### Seeking A New Pattern For Troops In Afghanistan

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Camouflage uniforms are supposed to help soldiers blend into their surroundings. But that's not what is happening in many instances with the camouflage pattern worn by U.S. Army soldiers.

Instead, the grey, green and tan "universal camouflage pattern" adopted for nearly all uses six years ago has become a new example of the Army's seeming inability to adapt quickly to new combat conditions.

The uniforms were designed mainly with the deserts of Iraq in mind — though even there, internal Army studies have shown, the camouflage pattern is considered less able to hide its wearer than other color combinations. When the Army began to shift troops to Afghanistan in recent months, soldiers worried that the pattern actually made them stand out in some settings found in that country's diverse terrain, including in landscapes with darker earth, green valleys and mountain woodlands.

Although the Army has been conducting studies of the

uniforms since 2006, nothing was done to replace the camouflage &mdash; and perhaps nothing was going to be done &mdash; until influential members of Congress, such as John P. Murtha, the Pennsylvania Democrat who chairs the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, stepped in and ordered it.

Murtha said he was moved to act after talking with about a dozen non-commissioned officers when he visited Fort Benning, Ga., in March. The non-coms had serious concerns that the camouflage pattern was ineffective, Murtha wrote in the conference report accompanying the 2009 war supplemental. The report ordered the Defense Department to &ldquo;take immediate action to provide combat uniforms to personnel deployed to Afghanistan with a camouflage pattern that is suited to the environment of Afghanistan.&rdquo;

The incident is reminiscent of the early days of the Iraq War and insurgency, when military personnel displeased with the Army&rsquo;s standard-issue gear sometimes spent their own money to buy bulletproof vests and other protective equipment. Some soldiers even scavenged dumps for makeshift armor to bolt to their trucks and Humvees because they were vulnerable to ambushes and roadside bombs.

Troops in Afghanistan, which until recently was a much smaller conflict than Iraq, have felt particularly left out of Pentagon planning. For instance, while the Defense Department finally built enough Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles to withstand most roadside bombs in Iraq, the military has only lately begun to produce a more mobile version of the truck for use in Afghanistan&rsquo;s more challenging terrain.

Military officers and members of Congress have acknowledged the disparity in attention for years. As Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a House committee in 2007, &ldquo;In Afghanistan, we do what we can. In Iraq, we do what we must.&rdquo; It was early in the Iraq War, in 2004, that the Army adopted its universal camouflage pattern, a light-colored, pixilated uniform. Each service picks its own patterns; the Marine Corps, for instance, has a different uniform for desert and woodland operations. Even the Air Force and Navy have camouflage patterns for their personnel who serve in the field.

Since at least 2006, internal Army studies have shown problems with the universal pattern. Camouflage works by visually breaking up the outline of a soldier&rsquo;s body, and the studies found that the universal pattern is less able to hide a soldier&rsquo;s whereabouts in a variety of settings than several alternatives. And the uniform is much worse than almost every other option when soldiers are fighting in woodlands, which are found in many parts

of Afghanistan but less frequently in Iraq.

Confirming that research, frontline soldiers who have been fighting in Afghanistan since 2001 have expressed worries about the lack of protection afforded by the universal uniform. They have said so in blogs and in post-deployment surveys. And some have said so directly to lawmakers.

Army officers say they are aware of the complaints and have been studying the problem, but Army leaders have not considered new uniforms a terribly pressing need. Indeed, it was not until June 2009, when Murtha intervened, that the Army launched a program to field better uniforms.

By early February, Army leaders are expected to decide whether to change the uniforms for some or all of the soldiers in Afghanistan, starting in about six months. It is not yet clear that they will do so, but the pressure on them from lawmakers is increasing.

In December, two influential Democrats — Ike Skelton of Missouri, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, and Solomon P. Ortiz of Texas, who chairs the subcommittee on Readiness — wrote to Mullen and Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates after hearing complaints about equipment from soldiers who had served in Afghanistan. Soldiers at bases in Germany and Italy told the two chairmen that the Army camouflage uniform, in the lawmakers' words, "does more to put our soldiers in harm's way than to protect them."

"These soldiers are fighting today on the front lines in Afghanistan, and we implore you to take their concerns to heart and see what we can all do to give them the tools they need," Skelton and Ortiz wrote. "We want to work with you to help all of our brave men and women accomplish the task that has been asked of them so that they can safely return home to their family and loved ones."

Even though the Army is taking steps to field improved camouflage, officials have minimized the importance of the uniforms in concealing soldiers' movements versus other safety factors, such as the time of day the soldiers are moving and the routes they take. As recently as September, in a report to Murtha on the camouflage issue, Army Secretary John M. McHugh wrote that commanders in Afghanistan have not asked for a new camouflage pattern, and so it is "not a priority from an operational perspective."

McHugh said in his report that the universal camouflage model, despite limitations, provides "adequate concealment across a range of environments."

Moreover, there is no evidence that soldiers have died in Afghanistan because their uniforms made their locations known to the enemy, said Col. William Cole, the project manager for soldier protection and individual equipment at Fort Belvoir, Va., headquarters of the Army's Materiel Command.

However, those summaries are at odds with the message of some rank-and-file soldiers and the Army's own test data. A 2006 report by the Army's Natick Soldier Research, Development and Engineering Center in the Massachusetts town of that name, found that a commercially available pattern called MultiCam "performed significantly better" in most cases than the Army's current pattern. The British army, in fact, announced in December that it is moving to MultiCam for all its regular soldiers. Cole said he and his colleagues have not discussed the issue in any formal way with their U.K. counterparts.

Another Natick study, conducted between 2007 and 2009, compared the Army's universal pattern to 12 other designs in desert, urban and woodland environments. The Army uniform ranked below the majority of the other models in each environment. In woodlands, the Army's uniform fared especially badly, with only one other type — Britain's desert model — ranking worse.

The study raised questions about the wisdom of the Army's \$5 billion decision in 2004 to go to a single combat uniform for all regular soldiers. (Army commandoes and snipers have different camouflage uniforms.) Previously, the Army's "battle dress uniform" came in multiple styles of camouflage.

The Army's decision now is whether to keep the current universal pattern at all and, if it is replaced, whether to supplant it with just one alternative or multiple options. The new models might only be used in Afghanistan, or in certain parts of the country, or for particular missions there, Cole said.

Changing out the whole Army would cost more than \$4 billion and take at least five years, McHugh said in his report to Congress, and just replacing all the uniforms in Afghanistan would cost at least \$400 million.

Following the language Murtha added to the supplemental, the Army has moved quickly, taking just months to conduct studies that previously took years. The Army has outfitted two battalions in Afghanistan with possible alternative camouflage patterns and then surveyed the soldiers on their views of the new suits. They also used photo tests — sort of a military “Where’s Waldo” game — to see if viewers could pick out hidden soldiers.

One officer working on the program said the Army’s increased emphasis on finding options for new uniforms in Afghanistan coincided not just with the new law but also with the Obama administration’s increased emphasis on the mission in Afghanistan.

“We were already studying it,” said Lt. Col. Michael Sloane, product manager for soldier clothing and individual equipment. The congressional action, he said, “forced us to maybe accelerate or look at what we were doing. But that’s about the time the shift of priorities was going toward Afghanistan, and that’s where the feedback was coming from. Up until that time, a smaller percentage of forces were operating in Afghanistan.”